

Sticking Power

Two fledgling entrepreneurs' hair-raising idea is cleaning up.

By Dennis Arp

The idea was great—everyone said so. It's just that there were these sticking points.

Sure, it made sense to mass-market a giant, more sophisticated version of cellophane tape to remove pet hair from large surfaces. But how to keep the sheets of tape from sticking to themselves? And how best to advertise the product? And how to break into retail markets?

The challenges might have overwhelmed a pair of fledgling entrepreneurs, married musicians who performed modern Celtic music and had no experience in product development, marketing or sales.

But Wen Boley and Rebecca Hilton have six children. They don't overwhelm easily.

"Right from the start, I had a deep belief that this would succeed," Boley said of Sticky Sheets, the Castle Rock, Colo.-based company he and Hilton founded in 2005.

"I think our inexperience was a strength," he said. "We got to set the company up the way we would want a company to run. We could establish the perspective and the mission. Then it would be our responsibility to make this work."

Making Sticky Sheets work is now Boley's passion, taking him from an initial \$70,000 investment, supplied by family and friends, to more than \$1 million in capital, invested by a lot more family and a lot more friends.

"I have 115 of these awesome people who are a real blessing to me," Boley said. "They want to do wonderful things with the profits from Sticky Sheets. One writes children's books and wants to launch them. Another wants to open a healing center."

After a first run of 10,000 sheets to test the market, Sticky Sheets jumped to a second order of 100,000 sheets, then in six

months to 600,000, with the next order topping a million. Boley already has his sights on his ultimate goal: weekly sales of 1 million sheets.

"I've found that this whole process is very much like raising a child," Boley said. "No matter how much you know, you still have to go through the growth process and find out all the things you didn't know you didn't know."

Bright Idea

The initial excitement for the Sticky Sheets idea washed over Boley while he was at the car wash. It was December 2004, and he had just paid \$275 at auction for a '93 Chevy Cavalier as a Christmas gift for his 17-year-old son. He wanted to spruce up the car, but even after spending an hour and half and \$12 in quarters, he couldn't get all the dog hair off the upholstery.

The idea for Sticky Sheets hit Boley almost fully formed. He envisioned broad strips of adhesive cellophane that would remove pet hair with one application. Even the name came to him immediately. He was so excited that he shared the idea with the car wash attendant.

Hilton was used to hearing Boley's ideas. Some showed a fair amount of promise; others were, well, less than spectacular.

"Harebrained," Hilton said, eschewing diplomacy. "Wen is an idea-a-minute man. I do the reality check."

When Boley floated the Sticky Sheet concept, Hilton could hardly contain her enthusiasm. In fact, she chastised him for trying to give away the idea.

So Boley invested \$500 in a patent search and was pleased to learn the idea was original. Within three weeks, he had developed a business plan, raised \$70,000 and put together a mock-up of a TV commercial.

"We had been playing modern Celtic music under the name



Rebecca Hilton and Wen Boley, proud owners of the Colorado-based Sticky Sheets company, went from musicians to successful entrepreneurs.

Twinflame for 10 years, and we were able to make a living at it, which is amazing for musicians," Boley said. "But we really thought our music would be that much more fun if we could put more of our own money into it. We thought Sticky Sheets might be a good way to gain that wealth while providing a product people really needed."

Some quick research revealed a plethora of products for removing pet hair, but all had small surface areas and took a long time to do a big job. Boley said he learned that pet owners were spending an average of an hour a week removing hair.

"Multiply that by 50 million households with hairy pets and that's 250 million man hours spent cleaning up pet hair," he said. "If we could even cut that in half, we'd be bringing real improvement to people's lives."

Boley contacted a company for product development and manufacturing, but job one was always to keep the sheets from clinging to themselves.

"We had to create a backing so a person could actually pull off a sheet without having to get

help," he said. "The product had to be as convenient as possible or people just wouldn't use it."

Boley's vendor perfected a formula that was strong but flexible, super sticky but didn't adhere to itself, had prominent tabs so the backing could peel off easily, and was water-soluble so if a mischievous child stuck a sheet to his sister's hair, Mom or Dad could remove it with a little spritz.

"It took about a dozen different attempts to get it just the way we wanted," Boley recalled.

Trial and Error

But for Boley and Hilton, the challenges were just beginning.

They decided to go the direct response route, but their first homemade TV commercial failed miserably. They failed to highlight that sheets don't stick to themselves, so viewers assumed the worst.

Then Boley and Hilton hired a professional TV production company, but the second commercial did even worse.

"They didn't have our passion for the product, they took lots of our money and we lost

lots of momentum," Boley said.

So the pair went back to trusting their own instincts, and they fearlessly applied lessons that started yielding results.

They discovered that their original price point fueled a perception that undervalued the product.

"When we doubled the price, we doubled our orders," Boley said. "That was an eye-opening experience about how we had to create the value perception."

Sticky Sheets' TV commercials have been through 18 incarnations and now trumpet the product's many alternative uses—from a temporary bib to a drop cloth for painting. The company has also found success on home-shopping channels.

"It's really fun to watch 1,500 packages get sold in 24 minutes," Boley said.

With manufacturer's representation, Sticky Sheets is making a move into retail stores. A handful of stores are carrying the product, and Boley expects to be on many more shelves by summer.

The sheets—2 feet by 3 feet in packs of three (\$5.99 retail), six (\$9.99) and 24 (\$18.99)—are still Boley's babies, but he and Hilton have avoided the entrepreneurial pitfall of trying to do everything themselves. They outsource everything but fulfillment and customer service.

"We get about five to 10 calls a day on our customer service line, and they are of one or two kinds," Boley said. "Either they ordered two days ago and they want to know where it is, or they're thanking us just for putting the product out."

"It's such a joy to take those positive calls and to hear people's satisfaction."

For performers Boley and Hilton, there's really only one way to describe the pleasure of hearing consumers sing their product's praises: like music to their ears.